Wait!

SOP Says No Compound Unr

By Lt. Russ Raines

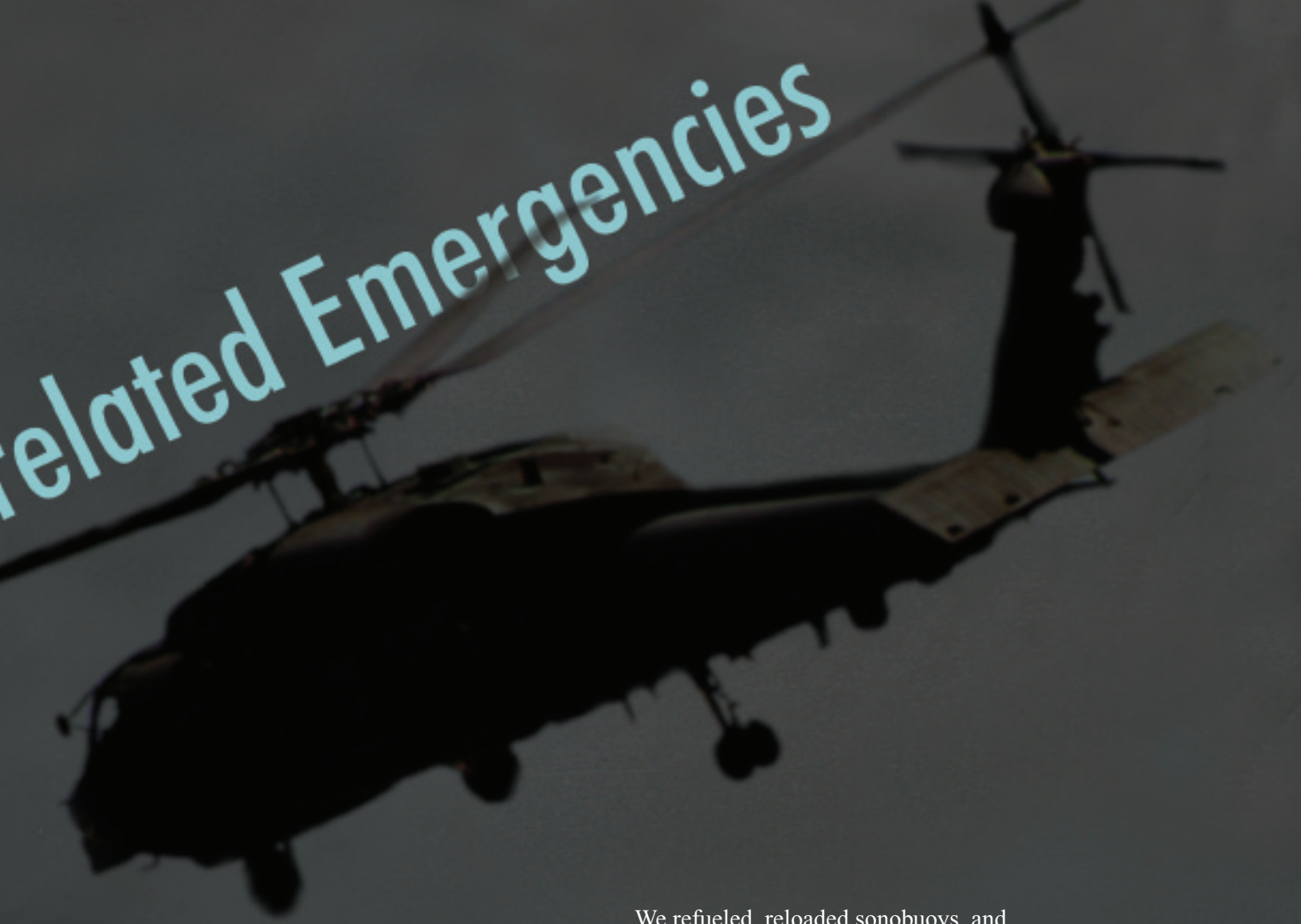
Our cruiser had conducted contingency operations near Taiwan for several weeks. A previously tense operating environment had become routine, reminiscent of Arabian Gulf flight ops. You remember those: sweating during the preflight, launching, and then droning around for a four-hour mission. This night, however, certainly broke the monotony.

We took off into a moonless night. Our mighty SH-60B began to climb as the HAC called, "Ops normal, gear up." He was an H-2 transition guy. The cloud deck was at 500 feet, and we decided to stay below it. With the carrier aircraft tucked away for the night, we were lords of the sky–defenders of freedom and the carrier battle group.

We ate our box lunches and started our evening search for BBC World News on the HF radio. Save for the moonless night, low ceiling, and contingency operations, the mission seemed routine and uneventful.

Surprisingly, the controller called on link and said we needed to quickly close the ship–they had an active sonar contact. Sitting as the airborne tactical officer on the left side and being the H2P, I had visions of FRS simulators flashing through my head: buoy patterns, ranges, demanding instructors. Then I returned to reality: We were spooling up for real ASW. Scanning the instruments, I noticed we were zooming inbound at a blistering 65 knots. After my best "Well?" facial expression (I was not communicative at night), the HAC ranted, "It's gonna be a pinnacle, or a wreck…how often does a cruiser pinging on its sonar actually gain contact?"

The sonobuoys went in the water; we waited and actually gained contact. What does every former H-2 driver say after sniffing a sub? "Stream the MAD." With 150 feet of cable and shape flying form behind the aircraft, we trolled



for a sub. We consistently gained MAD hits on the target, and we were able to stay with him. All too soon, we had to RTB for fuel. We were feeling good, pumped up from maintaining contact, and eager to get back in the game.

Returning to homeplate, we heard many people on the link, playing ASW warrior. A P-3 had checked in on the ship's land-launch frequency. The three of us constantly tried to coordinate with folks on three different radios. There definitely was too much chatter. We decided to keep everyone, except the LSO, off the radios, so we could concentrate on the approach and landing. Despite our efforts, the ASW problem followed us to the deck, with the P-3 TACCO clobbering our recovery frequency, giving hot and cold reports to our ship. The ship tried to explain there was a helo trying to recover so everyone should be quiet. We kept saying, "Please stand by," but these calls went unheeded, so we basically made an EMCON recovery.

We refueled, reloaded sonobuoys, and launched back into the charcoal sky. Shifting back into ASW mode, we streamed the MAD and tried to regain submarine contact.

Almost immediately, things began to unravel. Eager to regain contact, we were surprised to see our first systems problem of the evening, a cable limit light. The MAD had not deployed properly. We cursed the system and decided to reel the cable back in. It didn't want to. Adhering to NATOPS limits about overheating the reeling machine, we postponed this action for 15 minutes. "No sweat," the HAC said. "It happened in the H-2 all the time." As this went on, I noticed how we were slowing, then going faster, and the pilot didn't hold the headings I gave him. He wasn't keeping the wings level, either. I meekly put it down to vertigo and asked if he was all right. He said, "Yes," as he continued to correct the deviations.

I definitely didn't have a warm-and-fuzzy, but it was night, and a lot was going on. The HAC kept asking if it was time to again reel in the MAD. The crewman patiently replied, "It has

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Photo composite by Matthew J. Thomas

only been two minutes since you last asked, sir." We discussed jettisoning the MAD with the emergency release when the HAC made a great call. He had us stop the ASW problem and take a step back to assess our situation.

As any LAMPS crew could imagine, the ship would not hear of it. We respectfully ignored their prodding and switched the ASW system over to ship control.

The HAC decided to pass the controls to me so he could help troubleshoot the MAD. Of course, up to now, I hadn't touched the controls for hours. I quickly shuffled the charts, moved my eyes from the tactical display to the instruments, and announced, "I have the controls." In the blink of an eye, we were 15 degrees nose down and accelerating–this from only 400 feet. I yanked back on the cyclic and pulled an armload of collective. The helo responded for all it was worth and climbed rapidly. I overcorrected on the recovery–sweating, swearing, and hoping the MAD hadn't hit the water. I was reminded of the T-34 simulator in flight school; it just wouldn't stay straight and level. I got it under control as best I could and felt something was missing from the automatic-flight-control system (AFCS): namely, everything. Actually, the trim and stabilization were gone, along with the aircraft's ability to keep itself out of the water.

I had it reasonably under control, and the HAC was troubleshooting the AFCS. I was surprised he hadn't taken the controls from me. He said he had noticed the aircraft just wouldn't stay trimmed or stable but hadn't mentioned it because he was preoccupied with the MAD. I guess he was just concentrating so hard on scan and airwork that he wasn't aware trim had left the picture.

I was not warmed up to catch such a departure. ORM time. We were puttering around in night IMC, with a streamed and stuck MAD, no stabilization, and our ship was prodding us to get back in the ASW problem. "Stand by" became our watchword. We tried to explain what was going on, but it just wasn't getting through to the ship that we really had a multi-system compound emergency, at night, with a 500-foot ceiling.

We tried to reel in the MAD again. Our aircrewman hung out the cabin door and tried in vain to see if the cable was still attached. The beam of his flashlight wouldn't reach far enough. He sat down and tried again to reel it in. This time the reeling machine worked, and he looked back out the door.

Despite the windblast, we clearly heard an even louder blast of expletives from him. After the HAC came back down into his seat, the crewman explained that yes, the MAD was visible, but it was lodged sideways. No real danger, just no supersonic flight.

We followed our survival instinct and realized this just wasn't our night. Now all we had to do was shoot an AFCS-off, IMC approach to the back of the ship and land. Meanwhile, the HAC had discovered his trim-release button on the cyclic had stuck in the down position and wouldn't budge. This fifty-cent button was negating our multi-million-dollar stabilization system. The subsequent approach and landing were ugly to be sure, but we got aboard.

Situational awareness and an acute sense of when to back off led to sound decision-making. That sort of judgement allowed our crew, the aircraft, and all its parts to make it safely back on deck. We shut down and politely declined the ship's request to re-launch.

Lt. Raines is an FRS instructor with HSL-41. He was with HSL-51 at the time of the incident.